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THE 6th ANNUAL BASEBALL ISSUE

# Belle of the Ball

*Reclaiming the national pastime*

BY DONNELL ALEXANDER

**To understand how** the man who was passed over for the baseball writers' 1995 Most Valuable Player award — the cat described during the last World Series as "200 pounds of malevolence" — became my favorite baseball player, you'd have to consult a 5-year-old baseball card.

One of the great hokey aspects of baseball cards is the card's back side. Often, an anonymous, simply drawn cartoon figure — he's signified as a ballplayer only by the cap he's wearing — depicts the player's hobby (hunting, fishing, etc.) beneath an avalanche of statistics and career analysis. P.R.-driven, the idea is to provide a humanizing connection between professional athlete and young fan. These comics were once simple ("Bobby Murcer enjoys skiing!"), but by the 1970s, they got plain weird ("Dan Ford enjoys disco dancing!").

Albert Belle's cartoon five years ago read, "Albert's favorite group is Public Enemy!" and showed a large boom box with musical notes emerging.

When I saw that card I nearly died. To fathom the depth of this message, you must understand that Public Enemy, the now-deceased political rap group, preached that the media function as primary organs of oppression in this country's system of white supremacy by obscuring context in its analysis. Considering that Chuck D, the group's leader, found sports metaphors to be his most useful literary device, the Belle card was like a private joke among Albert, Chuck D, me, and P.E. fans around the globe.

Don't believe the hype, indeed. Steve Marantz, writing in *The Sporting News* earlier this year, noted, "Pinpointing the root of Belle's mistrust [of reporters] is speculative." Well, I know exactly why Albert Belle hates the press, and it makes him my hero as much as the way he swings the bat and stares down pitchers.

**In Ken Burns'** 1994 documentary, *Baseball*, writer Gerald Early recalled of his youth, "I don't think there was anything in America that made me feel American, except baseball." He's right: something about baseball allows Americans to insert themselves into the context of the game. It could be the everyman nature of the sport's physical component, which allows for heroes as flabby as Cecil Fielder and as storklike as Randy Johnson. It could be the way the game has spun over time to represent the interests of this country's citizenry. Maybe Gerald and I and the rest of baseball's fans are just victims of an excellent sustained ad campaign.

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# Baseball, Unplugged

BY RICHARD MELTZER

**I used to** like baseball, which is not to say I ever REALLY liked baseball, not the way I liked football or hockey, for inst, not that I exactly pay attention to either of *them* anymore, and certainly not the way I once cared about boxing, which I'm sort of following again after a gap of, oh, ever since Marvin Hagler, that goddam Force of Nature, had the utter fucking *gall* to lose to TV cheesepuff Sugar Ray Leonard — at least I'm watching it again — and sumo, my current great love, I've never stopped watching, but I never watch baseball. Haven't seen a game since the Series where I guess it was Minnesota that beat, who was it, Atlanta? But I did used to watch my quota every year and sometimes even v. much cared what happened. In my personal sports pantheon, it had its place and its role.

This will probably sound dumb, but if you assigned a different part of speech to each of the various big-time sporting genres, football (even in its "soccer" incarnation) would seem to be a verb, basketball an adverb, hockey a preposition, and boxing (sumo) an interjection. Baseball, on the hottest day of its life, is little more than a noun — or an *intransitive* verb — what sport has less, dare I say it, action? Bowling (a pronoun?)? Golf (an adjective?)?

Baseball is not a sport in which very much HAPPENS. It's not so much sparse as simply . . . uneventful. Static. The only reason there's so much noise at games is all these Cub Scouts and whatnot who think every fly ball is a home run. (Am I right or am I right?) Even seasons feel like nouns — long German nouns — composites and accumulations of stasis, so much of it a day, a week, a month. So much is necessary to suggest motion or, even tougher, "progress" — moving from fourth place to third, enduring 162 games with a modicum of "success" — that without the hype to suggest otherwise, seasonal gestalts would be as inertial as frozen shit.

Or maybe baseball is an ellipsis. Dot dot dot. Fill in the blanks. Because so little is in fact happening, and often nothing is happening, not on the field, YOU get to supply the "meaning" — virtually any meaning you want. With so much occasion to do just that, so much time between moments of "action" to do/think about anything else as well, it's your choice, your call, how much baseball to even shuffle in. Or leave the blanks blank — it's the sport you don't have to pay *any* attention to — that makes it *easy* to pay no attention. Which is cool, ultimately, because that way it can never own you. Not with any continuity. All it can do is creep up on you at dumb times, in dumb ways. It certainly has, I must admit, crept up on me . . .

**Accidents happen. Living** in New York from the '40s through the '60s, I couldn't help but get sucked into a mother lode of Regional Mythos. Between 1949, the year my parents got a TV, and 1964, a New York–based team, and often two, played in the World Series with only one exception — in '59 the Dodgers, who'd left Brook-

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